

**Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis**  
**Government Reform Committee hearing:**  
**“Back to the Drawing Board: A First Look at Lessons Learned from Katrina”**  
**September 15, 2005**

Good morning, and welcome to today’s hearing, which marks this Committee’s first look at lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina.

Two months ago former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich testified before our Federal Workforce subcommittee about the need to move the government to an “entrepreneurial” model and away from its current “bureaucratic” model so that we can get government to move at the speed and effectiveness of the Information Age.

“*Implementing* policy effectively,” Speaker Gingrich said, “is ultimately as important as *making* the right policy.”

Indeed, a policy that cannot be implemented effectively is no policy at all.

We are here today because, in the tragic aftermath of Katrina, we are again confronted with the vast divide between policy creation and policy implementation.

Confronted with the life-and-death difference between theory and practice.

Confronted with the daunting challenge, as one of our witnesses will discuss this morning, of understanding that we both did things wrong and did wrong things.

We have all spent much of the past two weeks examining the aftermath of this catastrophic disaster. It has become increasingly clear that local, state, and federal government agencies failed to meet the needs of the residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Now it’s our job to figure out why, and to make sure we are better prepared for the future.

First and foremost, our thoughts and prayers go out to the hurricane’s victims. Their families. Their friends. The loss of life, of property, of livelihoods and dreams has been enormous. And we salute all Americans who have stepped to the plate to help in any way they can.

At this stage, we agree we need to conduct our oversight in a manner that does not interfere with rescue and relief efforts. We agree that many questions need to wait; no one wants to take people away from the massive job at hand.

But I also think some issues can and should be looked at now. Our members want to begin doing oversight, and the American people are demanding it as well.

We can begin contributing to the dialogue this morning by looking at emergency plans in other major metropolitan areas – places that potentially face, and in fact have

faced, similar catastrophic events, natural or manmade. This review serves two purposes: it can help make sure others are better prepared, and it can guide and inform the subsequent work we'll be doing specific to Katrina.

Whatever the threat, Katrina has forced officials across America to take another look at disaster plans that may not be as solid as they previously thought.

This process of reevaluation will be the focus of the Committee's first post-Katrina hearing.

Later, when it's appropriate, we can turn to the myriad other questions that are begging for answers.

This is not the time to attack or defend government entities for political purposes. This is a time to do the oversight we're charged with doing. Our goal should be to investigate aggressively what went wrong and what went right. We'll do it by the book, and let the chips fall where they may.

It's hard not to point fingers and assign blame in the aftermath of tragedy. I understand human nature, and I understand politics. But I think most Americans want less carping and more compassion. I think most Americans want a rational, thoughtful, bipartisan review of what went wrong and what went right. I think most Americans want to know we'll be better prepared the next time.

In his letter to me last week requesting hearings, Mr. Waxman raised many important questions that need to be addressed: whether FEMA has been organizationally undermined and under-funded; whether evacuation plans were adequate; whether opportunities to better safeguard the New Orleans levee system were missed; why relief and medical supplies and support were seemingly slow in arriving; and several others.

But I believe the letter overlooked many other questions that need to be asked, and prematurely faulted the federal government for all governmental shortcomings; in fact, local and state government failures are not mentioned *at all* in the letter.

For example, Mr. Waxman's letter wondered why "there were no federal plans for evacuating residents without access to vehicles" and why "the Department of Homeland Security fail[ed] to ensure basic communications capacity" for first responders. We undoubtedly need to figure out why evacuation plans and emergency communications systems were woefully deficient; we don't need to prematurely paint the picture that these are solely, or even primarily, federal government responsibilities.

Probably the worst lesson to be gleaned from this disaster is that all answers to shortcomings in emergency preparedness can be found in Washington. But we can and should lead the way when it comes to questions.

It remains difficult to understand how government could respond so ineffectively to a disaster that was predicted for years, and for which specific dire warnings had been issued for days. If this is what happens when we have advance warning, I shudder to imagine the consequences when we do not. If ever there were a time for leaders at all levels of government to come together and review and coordinate their emergency plans, it's now.

So let's focus on the task at hand. Let's focus on how policy implementation became so wildly divorced from policy creation.

On why there was such a depth of government hesitancy at all levels.

On why we confused getting the *government* ready with getting *people* ready.

It's true, and important to emphasize, that Katrina's scale and scope were unprecedented. This was a big, big storm.

But the cities and counties represented here today face the possibility of similar catastrophic events. In fact, they've previously tweaked their plans in response to past hurricanes, earthquakes, terror attacks, and angry men on tractors. I'm sure they've begun tweaking again.

They're here today to discuss whether they're better prepared than New Orleans, and why.

What triggers full-blown action, and who do they talk to first?

Are they further along in developing clear and realistic evacuation plans that meet the needs of *all* residents? Will they hesitate in issuing *mandatory* evacuation orders? Is there agreement on what mandatory means?

Would they be better able to inform the public about what to do and where to go?

Do they know who will communicate with whom, and are they sure everyone will be speaking the same language?

Do they understand the weather advisories they get from forecasters?

Do they expect federal officials to wait for specific requests for assistance, and will they be able to gather the information needed to make them?

The questions are many, and the answers are few. Today we begin the process of clarifying failure and searching for improvement.

Perhaps the biggest problem with Katrina is that many people didn't listen before the hurricane arrived, and communication was impossible after. I hope we can start communicating more clearly this morning.